

# WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES TO CONFEDERATION?

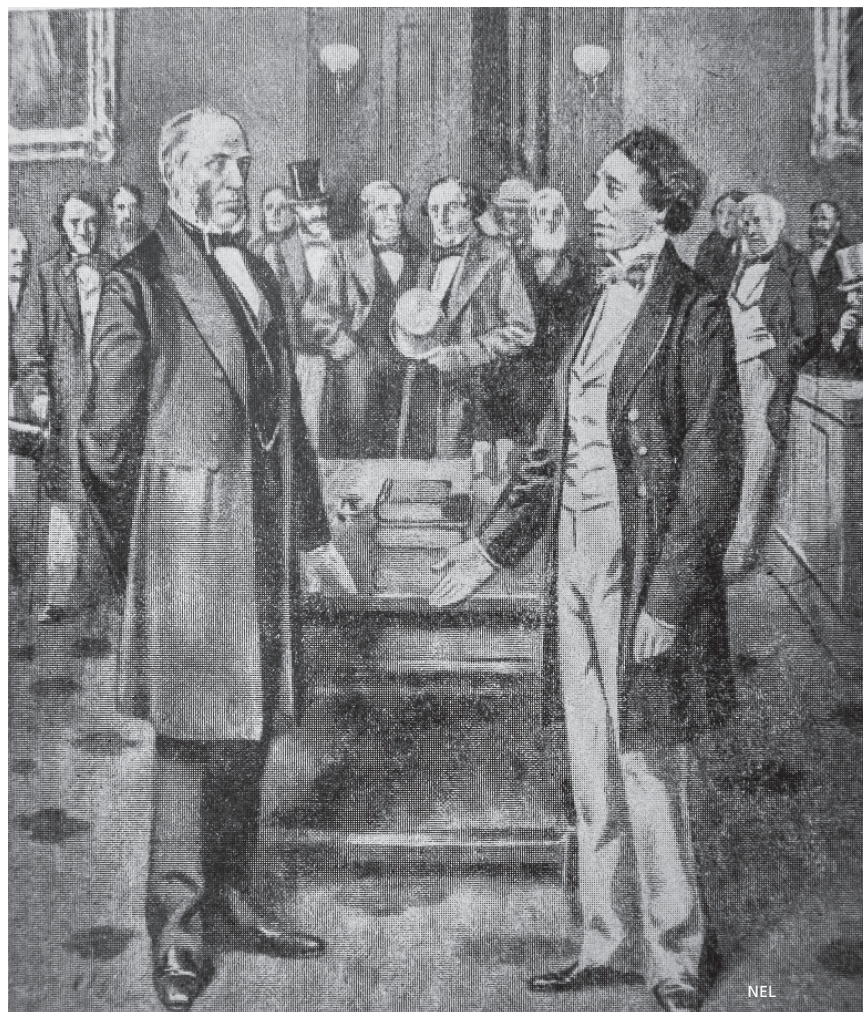
By the mid-1860s, British North America was facing various threats from the United States. Each colony was also dealing with challenges within its own borders. In the Province of Canada, the French-Catholic majority in Canada East and the English-Protestant majority in Canada West were locked in conflict. The Atlantic colonies needed ways to boost their economic development after the Reciprocity Treaty was cancelled. On the Pacific Coast, the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia were facing financial problems after the end of the gold rush.

## CONFLICTS IN THE PROVINCE OF CANADA

In the Province of Canada, ruling two very different groups with one government was challenging, especially as the population grew. The government grew politically unstable. In Canada West, Conservative Party leader John A. Macdonald and Liberal Party leader George Brown were bitter rivals. They were divided over many issues, in particular those concerning French rights. Brown wanted to diminish French political power in the Province of Canada and assimilate French Canadians. Macdonald wanted to uphold the rights of the French and protect their equal representation in the government. Both leaders eventually agreed that unifying colonies through Confederation offered a better chance of resolving the political conflict over Canada East. This is because Confederation would mean that Canada West and Canada East would each have its own local government but would also work together under one federal, or centralized, government.

Examine **Figure 2.12**, which depicts the moment at which Brown and Macdonald decided to work together. Why might this decision be considered a turning point on the path to Confederation?

**FIGURE 2.12** This undated artwork by C.W. Jefferys is entitled *George Brown and John A. Macdonald Meet to Inaugurate Confederation*. The term *inaugurate* means to begin or introduce. **Analyze:** What details in the painting suggest that this meeting between the two leaders was significant?



What alternatives to Confederation might have resolved the problems in the colonies?

How does Cartier's vision compare with McGee's vision in Figure 2.2?

**FIGURE 2.13** This is a translated excerpt from a speech given by Canada East's Premier Cartier during a Parliamentary debate on Confederation, February 7, 1865. **Analyze:** What concerns of the people of Canada East does Cartier address in this statement?

Many people in Canada East were opposed to the idea of Confederation. But their political leader, George-Étienne Cartier, believed the union would deliver greater protections, more independence, and a better future for the French. Cartier may have been persuaded in this belief by the support Macdonald had shown in protecting French-Catholic rights in the Province of Canada. Read the quote in **Figure 2.13**. What is Cartier's vision for the new, unified country?

“[I]f union is attained, we shall form a political nationality with which neither the national origin, nor the religion of any individual, will interfere. It was lamented by some that we had this diversity of races, and hopes were expressed that this distinctive feature would cease. The idea of unity of races is utopian—it is impossible.... In our own Federation we will have Catholic and Protestant, English, French, Irish and Scotch, and each by his efforts and his success will increase the prosperity and glory of the new Confederacy.”

— George-Étienne Cartier, *Father of Confederation*

## THE GREAT COALITION

Macdonald, Brown, and Cartier formed an unlikely alliance in June 1864, known as the Great Coalition. The three leaders began working toward creating a federal system for the Canadas. But the goal was to expand the arrangement to include other colonies in British North America, as well as Rupert's Land and the North-Western Territory. A **legislative union** would give more power to the central government for making laws and running the country. A **federal union** would give power to the central government, as well as to the provinces to run their own affairs.

Officials in Britain supported the idea of a union. But there were groups in every region of British North America that did not support the idea. They believed that uniting the colonies under one central government would cause more problems than it would solve.

## CONCERNS IN CANADA EAST

Read the excerpt from a speech by Jean-Baptiste-Éric (J.B.E.) Dorion, a journalist and politician from Canada East, in **Figure 2.14**. What is Dorion's primary concern about Confederation?

“I oppose Confederation because I foresee innumerable difficulties with the joint powers given to the local and general governments in several areas. These conflicts will always be resolved in favour of the general government and to the detriment of the often legitimate [lawful] claims of the Provinces.”

— J.B.E. Dorion, *anti-Confederationist from Canada East*

**legislative union** power to govern and make laws is held by a strong, central government

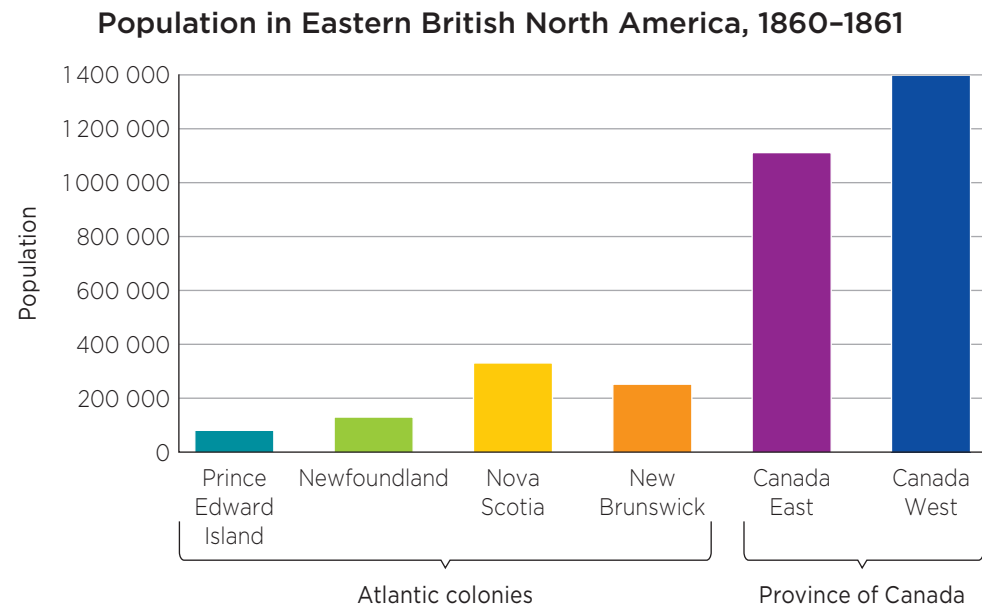
**federal union** power to govern and make laws is divided between the central and regional governments

**FIGURE 2.14** This is an English translation of part of a speech delivered in Parliament by J.B.E. Dorion on March 5, 1866. **Analyze:** What reasons could Dorion have to believe that conflicts will always be resolved in favour of the general government?



## CONCERNS IN THE ATLANTIC COLONIES

The Atlantic colonies had resource-based economies. They benefited from strong trade relationships with Britain, the United States, and beyond. Examine the population graph in **Figure 2.15**. Why do you think there was limited support for Confederation among those living in the Atlantic colonies?



**FIGURE 2.15** Population statistics based on an 1861 census (official count of the population), only a few years before Confederation talks began. **Analyze:** Based on population alone, which region would have the greatest influence in a union of the colonies?

## NEWFOUNDLAND

Newfoundland's economy was suffering in the 1860s due to a decline in the cod- and seal-fishing industries. Government revenue had decreased as a result. Almost one-quarter of the revenue the government took in was spent on providing relief to those struggling in poverty. Some vocal opponents of Confederation, such as merchant and mining entrepreneur Charles Fox Bennett, persuaded Newfoundlanders that the economic decline was temporary. He used fear tactics to further the movement against Confederation. Read his editorial comment in **Figure 2.16**. Why would Newfoundland's geographic location provide a strong argument against the colony joining Confederation?

Why would remaining as a British colony be a better option for Newfoundland than joining Confederation?

**FIGURE 2.16** Excerpt from an editorial Bennett wrote to *The Newfoundlander*, December 5, 1864. **Analyze:** Who does Bennett say will benefit from Confederation?

"We are chiefly and almost wholly by nature's laws a fishing population, possessing rich resources in our fisheries ... The sending of Delegates [representatives] to Canada ... would entail a very heavy expense ... the sacrifice of our independent legislation [laws] and the control of our own rich colonial resources for the benefit of that nationality which ... can confer [grant] but few and trifling [insignificant] benefits on us."

— Charles Fox Bennett, anti-Confederationist

## PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

The people in Prince Edward Island had developed strong trading ties with Britain and the United States. Their main industries were timber, farming, and shipbuilding. Read Edward Palmer's remarks in **Figure 2.17**. Palmer was premier of Prince Edward Island from 1859 to 1863. How do his concerns about Confederation compare with J.B.E. Dorion's statement in **Figure 2.14**?

"We would submit our rights and our prosperity ... into the hands of the general government and our voice in the united Parliament would be very insignificant."

— Edward Palmer, Father of Confederation

**FIGURE 2.17** Palmer delivered these remarks in April 1864. **Analyze:** What is Palmer's main concern regarding Confederation?

## NOVA SCOTIA

Nova Scotia's former premier Joseph Howe actively opposed Confederation. He wrote a series of 12 letters, called the Botheration Letters, that were published in the *Halifax Morning Chronicle* in early 1865. What is Howe arguing for in the letter excerpt in **Figure 2.18**?

What impact do you think the perspective of former premiers had on the discussions of Confederation?

"Nova Scotia, secure of self-government ... has been blessed with a good crop, an abundant fishery, a healthy season; her mining interests are extending; her shipyards have been busy all the year; her railroads are beginning to pay, and her treasury is overflowing.... We have not a question to create angry discussion with the mother country, with our neighbours in the United States, or with the Governments of the surrounding colonies.... Who says, then, that something should be done?"

— Joseph Howe, Nova Scotia's former premier

**FIGURE 2.18** Excerpt from a Botheration Letter by Howe dated January 11, 1865. **Analyze:** What does Howe imply Nova Scotia might lose by joining Confederation?

## NEW BRUNSWICK

In the mid-1860s, New Brunswick was split politically over Confederation. Anti-Confederation politician Albert J. Smith led his fellow opponents of Confederation to victory in the 1865 general election. How is the concern Smith notes in **Figure 2.19** similar to the concerns expressed by other anti-Confederation leaders?

Smith resigned in 1866 due to pressure from Britain to reconsider a union among the colonies. Another election was called and former premier Samuel Leonard Tilley, a pro-Confederation politician, won.

"[I]n a few years we shall be at the feet of Canada—Upper Canada—who will exercise control not only over Lower Canada but also over us."

— Albert J. Smith, premier of New Brunswick

**FIGURE 2.19** Smith expressed this concern about Confederation in the winter of 1864 to 1865. **Analyze:** What do you think the phrase "we shall be at the feet of Canada" means?



What positive and negative changes might Confederation bring to the Maritime colonies?

## A POSSIBLE MARITIME UNION

As you read in Chapter 1, the Maritime colonies were dealing with many challenges. Arthur Hamilton Gordon, the lieutenant-governor of New Brunswick, was concerned that a union with the Province of Canada would destroy the Maritime colonies' power and independence. Gordon instead believed that a Maritime union of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island offered a solution to many of their challenges. A Maritime union would also allow these colonies to pool their tax dollars to pay for much-needed infrastructure, such as roads and railways.

In September 1864, leaders from New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island met to discuss the union of their three provinces at the Charlottetown Conference. You will learn more about the Charlottetown Conference later in this chapter. **Figure 2.20** shows a sculpture of former premier John Hamilton Gray of Prince Edward Island (right) speaking with former premier of New Brunswick John Hamilton Gray (left) at the Charlottetown Conference. Both men had the same name but were not related, and they both went on to become Fathers of Confederation. Why do you think this conversation was so significant that it was commemorated in a sculpture 150 years later?

**FIGURE 2.20** This bronze sculpture by British Columbia artist Nathan Scott was unveiled in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, on September 4, 2014. **Analyze:** What message do you think is being communicated by the artist through the body language and positioning of these men?



## INCLUSION OF THE NORTHWEST REGION

By the time Confederation was being considered, the fur trade was in serious decline in British North America. The bison were disappearing, and some First Nations were suffering from food shortages, famine, and new diseases brought over by the settlers.

Despite not owning the North-Western Territory and Rupert's Land (see **Figure 2.1**), Hudson's Bay Company owned the rights to the fur trade in the region. Supporters of Confederation were eager to take over this vast land. They were worried about rumours that Hudson's Bay Company was willing to sell its dominion over the region to the United States. Read the words of John A. Macdonald in **Figure 2.21** and George Brown in **Figure 2.22**. Compare their perspectives to the American belief in manifest destiny that you learned about earlier in this chapter.

Supporters of Confederation believed they needed to convince people in Canada East and the Atlantic colonies to join the union. But they saw the lands controlled by Hudson's Bay Company as something that simply needed to be purchased in order to create settlements. Why do you think this region was viewed differently in the questions and discussions around Confederation?

## INCLUSION OF THE PACIFIC COAST

The end of the gold rush brought economic decline to the Pacific Coast. In 1866, the British government imposed a union on the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia to help improve their economic situations. The union, however, lacked a government responsible to the people because it consisted of many appointed, rather than elected, officials. With debt rising, British Columbia considered joining Confederation. This was a challenge since the colony was cut off from the rest of the colonies in the east by the vast expanse of Hudson's Bay Company lands. Also, some people in this region supported annexation by the United States over Confederation.

"I would be quite willing, personally, to leave that whole country a wilderness for the next half-century but I fear if Englishmen do not go there, Yankees will."  
— John A. Macdonald, Father of Confederation

**FIGURE 2.21** Excerpt from Macdonald's letter to British Member of Parliament and railway entrepreneur Sir Edward W. Watkin, 1865. **Analyze:** Why does Macdonald want to take over the lands controlled by Hudson's Bay Company?

"If Canada acquires this territory it will rise in a few years from a position of a small and weak province to be the greatest colony any country has ever possessed, able to take its place among the empires of the earth. The wealth ... of [this] territory will flow through our waters and be gathered by our merchants, manufacturers, and agriculturalists. Our sons will occupy the chief places of this vast territory, we will form its institutions, its rulers, teach its schools, fill its stores, run its mills, navigate its streams."  
— George Brown, Father of Confederation

**FIGURE 2.22** Excerpt from a *Globe* editorial by Brown, January 22, 1863. **Analyze:** What groups are being excluded from Brown's plans for the Northwest region?

## CHECK-IN

- GATHER AND ORGANIZE** What were the main arguments against Confederation?
- EVALUATE AND DRAW CONCLUSIONS** Which colony had the most to gain from joining Confederation? Which colony had the most to lose?
- HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE** Create a multimedia report or dramatic performance in role as someone living in British North America in the mid-1860s. What are your concerns? Use the primary sources in this section to support your perspective.